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IN  
PERPETUITY

The Museum's  
Continuing  
Role



From the days of King Solomon history has recorded great collections of objects—strange and unfamiliar as well as familiar ones, beautiful and useful objects, objects made by man and those of the natural world such as animals, plants, rocks and precious stones. These collections have reflected the taste, the wealth and power, or the skill and knowledge of those who have made them; and they have conveyed information to the studious and have stimulated the imagination of the idly curious. In all those periods of man's history marked by rapid advances in understanding there have been collections<sup>1</sup>. Philip of Macedonia and Alexander the Great had collections that Aristotle used for his researches, as the great Swedish naturalist, Linnaeus, used the collections of the Kings and Queens of Sweden in the 18th century<sup>1</sup>. Throughout the scientific revolution that followed the Renaissance in Western Europe, as ships sailed to new continents and as new instruments such as microscopes and telescopes revealed new structures and new dimensions, men turned to the study of collections of objects in order to satisfy their curiosity and to understand.

Great private collections were made by individuals and societies and these grew into museums accessible to others<sup>12</sup>. The Royal Society established its museum in London in 1681, and two years later the Ashmolean was founded by private bequest in Oxford University<sup>1</sup>. Then, in his will of 1753, Sir Hans Sloane, a London physician, offered his collection of nearly 80,000 objects to George II for the nation. The nation responded, the collection being purchased for £80,000, the sum raised by a lottery<sup>3</sup>. This was the collection that became the British Museum. The Prince of Wales had said of it 'how much it must conduce to the benefit of learning'<sup>3</sup>. It was probably with that end in view that one of the principles from which Sloane's trustees could not 'in honor or conscience depart' was—

that the collection be kept for the use and benefit of the publick, who may have free access to view and peruse the same<sup>3</sup>.

Thus, the British Museum was—

the first public museum of any size which.....had the temerity to aim at universality, belonged to the nation and, at least in theory, granted admission to all studious and curious persons<sup>3</sup>.

It was the first time that a museum's collections had been so readily accessible to the people and this policy profoundly affected the development of museums in the future.

When Queensland became a separate colony in 1859 the British Museum had been open to the public for just 100 years, for it was on 15 January 1759 that it had 'opened its doors to those "studious and curious persons" it was directed by act of parliament to admit'<sup>3</sup>. In the British Museum there were the objects and artefacts that were evidence of history as well as all manner of large and small animals and the remains of prehistoric ones. Although Sir Horace Walpole had made the caustic observation that 'Sir Hans Sloane valued his museum at four score thousand (pounds), and so would any body who loves hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese'<sup>3</sup>, clearly there were many who did not agree with him—nor, indeed, was his comment either fair or accurate. From the time the museum opened there was a clamour for admission<sup>4</sup>. It was said to be—

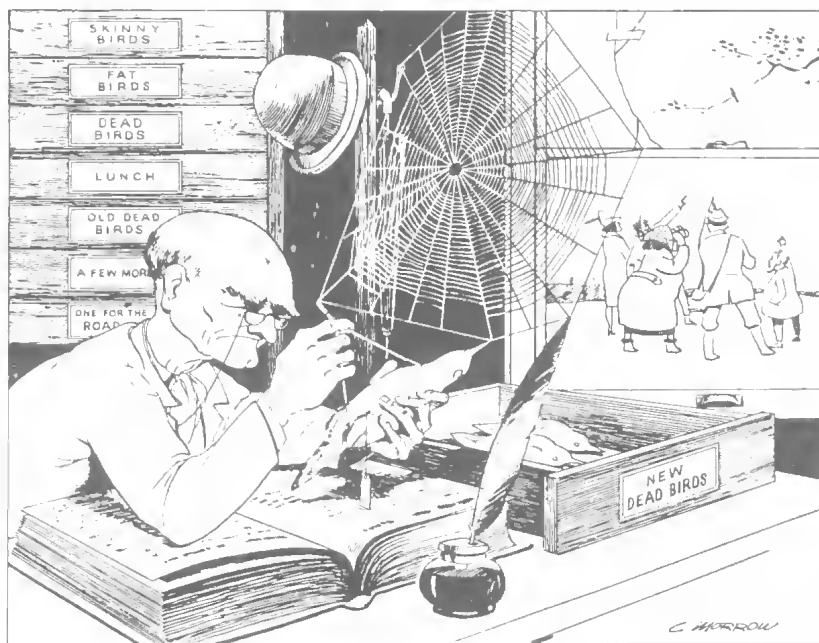
a palace full of all good things, the wonders of nature;..... and things of great value, both by reason of their being singular, there being no

*Previous page:* The Aboriginal Life diorama, created by Anthony Alder in 1914 and visited by generations of Queenslanders since then.

other like them, by reason of the costliness and beauty, or by artists, whose fame has gone forth through the world. There are they deposited and there are they to be met with in thousands and ten thousands, where they will be for ever a sign and wonder and spacious rooms full of books, both modern and ancient, printed and manuscripts, in innumerable languages the like was not seen, in all the earth since the foundation thereof, till now that the men of government expended abundance of money to purchase them, and to gather them within the great treasury, that it might be for the good of mankind, both the stranger, and for him that is born in the land.....<sup>5</sup>.

The British Museum afforded the nation a rich and tangible heritage and an archive of information wherein mysteries could be investigated and solved. This was the model that the settlers had known before they migrated to Australia. Far away in the colonies many immigrants were aware of the sense of identity, of continuity and of the knowledge of the new land that could be derived from a museum.

In 1845, just 17 years before the Queensland Philosophical Society had opened its museum, a group of like-minded men across the Pacific sought to persuade the American Congress that the establishment of a museum would fulfil the terms of James Smithson's bequest. Smithson was an Englishman, the illegitimate son of the Duke of Northumberland and man of the Enlightenment. His bequest to the United States of America was for 'an establishment for the increase and diffusion of Knowledge among men'<sup>6</sup>. In 1846 the ten year debate on what to do with the bequest concluded with legislation for, amongst other things, a museum, a study collection and a library in the Smithsonian Institution to be founded in Washington. It was not long before those who had interpreted Smithson's words in this way were vindicated. The institution flourished, executing the terms of the bequest right from the beginning when the research role of a museum was formalised by the pronouncement that 'the increase of knowledge by original research' was one of its essential functions<sup>6</sup>. It was to become, in due course, the great complex of U.S. national museums. In the early 1890s, one of the few men to have made a penetrating study



The museum collects, preserves and studies the material evidence of history and diversity (drawing reproduced with the permission of the artist, Clifford J. Morrow Jr, Carnegie Museum of Natural History, U.S.A., from Banks, R.C., ed., 1979, *Museums Studies and Wildlife Management* Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.).

of museums—George Brown Goode—had become director of the Smithsonian’s first U.S. National Museum. He declared that the museum of the future must be ‘a nursery of living thought and not a cemetery of “bric-a-brac”’<sup>6</sup>; and, while ‘recognizing that a museum could be a powerful tool of scholarly research’, he drew attention to its educational potential—‘he was alert to the new democratic age and sought to tap “the possibilities of public enlightenment” implicit in his museum’<sup>6</sup>. In other words, the role of a museum in diffusing knowledge was being explored and developed.

At about the same time, there was also a growing recognition of their educational role in the older museums in England. As the industrial revolution progressed and scientific discoveries accelerated, people had begun to look to the museums for explanations—to understand the new science and technology that were changing their lives and their concepts of the universe so profoundly. Now almost universally state-supported, the magnitude of their operation being beyond the capacity of even the wealthiest individuals, the museums responded and they began to promote their education programmes to justify their increasing cost to the community<sup>7</sup>.

Thus did museums evolve in response to the needs of communities in the Age of Enlightenment. Their three functions—to hold safely collections of objects, to increase knowledge, and to educate and entertain the people—who shall have free access to them—are now embodied in the definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM)—

A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution, in the services of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment<sup>8</sup>.

In 1975 the Australian Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections adopted the ICOM definition and explained it in the following words:

A nation gains in a variety of ways from the efficient preservation of objects in museums..... The collections are the heart of a museum.

A museum cannot live without scholarship.....any museum worth the name is engaged in the difficult search for new knowledge ... without scholarship to guide every stage from collecting to indexing, the museum collections could not have served as the foundations for the enormous platform of knowledge they now support.

As places of education museums have unusual advantages..... they are capable of instructing and entertaining people from every educational group and age group in the same gallery..... Secondly their collections of objects.....stimulate a sense of wonder and instil an understanding which makes the same message (communicated by other means) seem remote and second hand.....(and) a museum can often dispense with those layers of interpretation.....which.....separate an object or evidence from the audience<sup>9</sup>.

The Australian committee then proceeded to report on the restraints operating in Australian museums that prejudice their ability to fulfil their roles adequately<sup>8</sup>. In many cases conditions did not appear to have improved very much from those that existed in 1907 when Premier Kidston had assumed control of the Queensland Museum. Clearly puzzled as to the museum’s function, Kidston had asked Robert Etheridge to report on the role of a museum; whether the Queensland Museum was fulfilling that role; and if not, why not—what was needed to enable it to

do so. Etheridge had replied in the words from George Brown Goode's *Principles of Museum Administration*:

- 1 A museum is an institution for the preservation of those objects which best illustrate the phenomena of nature and the works of man and the utilization of them for the increase of knowledge and for the culture and enlightenment of the people.
- 2 The Public museum is a necessity in every highly civilized community.
- 3 The Community should provide adequate means for the support of the museum.
- 4 A museum cannot be established and creditably maintained without adequate provision in five directions:
  - A A stable organisation and adequate means of support
  - B A definite plan, wisely framed in accordance with the opportunities of the institution and the needs of the community for whose benefit it is to be maintained.
  - C Material to work upon — good collections or facilities for creating them.
  - D Men to do the work — a staff of competent curators.
  - E A place to work in — a suitable building.
  - F Appliances to work with — proper accessories, installation materials, tools and mechanical assistance.
- 5 A finished museum is a dead museum and a dead museum is a useless resource<sup>9</sup>.

Kidston used these recommendations as the basis of the reforms he sponsored in the museum 75 years ago, but it has taken a long time to realise the basic needs that Goode had defined. Only in 1986, for the first time in its history, and through a lineage of influences that can be traced to the great museum institutions of Britain and America, has the Queensland Museum had adequate accommodation and fine equipment in all its departments. It has a stable organisation, it is mature and confident, it has the support of a community which is increasingly using its services, and it has the support of the government. The Queensland parliament, in enacting the *Queensland Museum Act 1970-1985*, has acknowledged the museum's role. The Act recognises that the museum board holds the official collections of the state, and confers statutory protection on them for people and for scholarship. There has been a world-wide resurgence of interest in museums, for today, as never before, there is a concern for the natural environment and man's place in it; and a searching for expressions of national and individual identity. The Queensland Museum has its place in this world movement.

To ensure the institution's continuing ability to fulfil its role and its responsibilities under the Act, as well as satisfying the community's needs and earning its increasing support, the board has embodied the three functions of a museum in its major policy objectives:

to maintain the existing collections in such manner as to ensure their preservation in perpetuity, extend the systematic coverage of the Museum's collections by positive action to document the State's history and resources and ensure that storage systems and access to relevant information meet all existing and projected usages;

to ensure that the materials conservation programme of the Museum is fully supported and directed to identify and repair the existing damage or deterioration in the collections, monitor and advise on storage and display conditions which will safeguard the collections and provide the necessary research into particular problems;

to plan programmes of research which make realistic and economic use of the Museum's available expertise and facilities, towards the maintenance of a major source of authoritative knowledge in the State, available to all;

to prepare regularly changing exhibitions for the public which are object based but which incorporate the most appropriate techniques and display technology, supporting these with a temporary exhibition programme and other facilities which ensure full public satisfaction with the Museum and, at the same, provide travelling exhibitions to other parts of the State;

to communicate knowledge to the public generally and to develop an interest within the community in the Museum's fields of interest, using the full range of techniques and approaches available, ensuring that the Museum's educational activities are integrated with the requirements of the State Education Department and other organisations<sup>10</sup>.

Thus stated, the objectives of the museum are dynamic ones, flexible enough to accommodate the rapid change that is symptomatic of today's world — change in the needs and expectations of communities, change in social customs and values, and change in work patterns and leisure habits, as well as new technologies and an ever expanding body of knowledge.

The museum will record these changes and is ready to respond to them. It will preserve, in perpetuity, the authentic objects — the evidence of history that represent the truth — and, basing its studies on those objects, will contribute to the increase of knowledge and communicate it to the people. New materials and new techniques and philosophies of display



In 1985 the museum was looking forward to its move to South Brisbane.

and design are making it possible for museums to communicate information more readily than ever before—to entertain while they inform. In other words, to be more and more attractive and to be enjoyed. Thus the members of the community can aspire to understand and participate in decisions that affect them, and that will affect their children and their childrens' children in the future<sup>11</sup>.

